



The One Who Whispers 2012 (Claudi Thyrrestrup)

The One Who Whispers - The playwright as ghostwriter

By Laura Luise Schultz

The plot of *The One Who Whispers* (2012) is simple, but in the best Shakespearean mode full of ambiguities and role play, reflections, mirages, and confusions. The tall, red-haired poet Otto, whose immense sensitivity is confusingly similar to ordinary youthful stupor, is reading an advertisement attempting to contact relatives of the deceased Jenny Holst. Otto seeks out the woman in the chapel (in the cast list simply called the Woman) with a fictional story of how red-haired Jenny was the love of his life. Although Otto's memories of Jenny in no way match the Woman's information about Jenny as a destitute cat lady, the poet enters into such deep grief that he receives renewed care from his ex-girl friend (in the cast list called the Lady). But the Lady's new, energetic husband (in the cast list called the King) sets out to get to the bottom of the incoherent story. Two synchronized actors perform the King as a twin figure. The King, however, is hardly the only double-figure in this story, in which characters reflect and mirror each other, but never really reach one another, since they are physically isolated from any kind of interaction in separate lanes marked out on the floor. For Dehlholm the twin figure undoubtedly contains an existential dimension – the experience of being one and yet two, of being identical and yet different. But it is not the idea of reaching an unavoidable fate or a psychological core that is played through. Rather, Dehlholm displays the reverse experience, namely that differences, shifts, and changes shatter the notion of a single coherent identity throughout life.

In accordance with this instability of character, the genre of the play shifts according to the actions and moods of the characters. Along the way, the story develops from a love tragedy into a criminal intrigue, into a gothic ghost story, until the coffin is finally opened in the pursuit of truth – and the body turns out never to have existed. The advertisement was made up, a fiction inserted in a paper by the Woman in the chapel, but that fiction becomes precisely the binding and obligatory speech act that sets the plot in motion.

The morbid intrigue is thus also an allegory of the playwright as a *ghost writer*: author of eternal figures destined to be incarnated again and again in continuously new bodies that can play out the eternal themes of the drama of crisis and love in ever new constellations. The play points to the lack of physical reality behind the words of the drama – but at the same time lets these words subsequently bring the whole play and the very real and tangible plot, into play.

As such, the main point of the play turns out to be theater's duality between language and body. It is precisely this duality that performance theater, in continuation of *Antonin Artaud*, has sought to dissolve through its insistence on (pure) physical presence. But, of course, it always turns out that language permeates and splits physical presence. The body is always already a representation, a medium for literary meanings and social negotiations. Language and body, reality and fiction, are inextricably entangled in the theater. The exciting thing is how they interact.

Parallel trajectories of life

Hotel Pro Forma is often perceived as visual theater in the tradition of Robert Wilson, who is the most important single source of inspiration for Kirsten Dehlholm's work. But words have always played a significant role in Hotel Pro Forma. Its productions have included classical and modernist literature, poetry and pop texts, novels and essays, and many other literary genres. Texts and words have been recited, sung, projected, and distributed into space, and as such made to appear in an almost sculptural way. In *The One Who Whispers* this interest in language as both formative and performative literally takes center stage as the predominant motif of the play. Furthermore, with *The One Who Whispers* Dehlholm at last turns to the drama, and as such the play is Dehlholm's challenge to herself. It is obvious that precisely the drama is virtually a blank page for Hotel Pro Forma, where something new may happen. However, classical drama is not completely new territory for Dehlholm. She has done workshop productions of Ibsen's *Ghosts* in Aarhus, Denmark and Frederikstad, Norway, and one of the key devices from those productions, the use of separate lanes in space to structure the actors' movements, is lifted into *The One Who Whispers*. Any attempt at psychological insight is counteracted by the rigid spatial rules: the actors move in their own orbits or lanes, they do not look at each other, but look straight ahead. To prevent them from any naturalistic acting and empathic identification with the role, the actors were told not to learn the text by heart, but to retrieve it from a projection above the audience.

The stylization is so dominant that when a lane is finally crossed and the actors look at each other, the effect is huge. The schematic, physical separation creates a distance between the actors to provide room for the text as an almost spatial element. The set design has its own lane, standing to the left of the audience and shining with sculptural neon lights. Only indirectly does it refer to the text and the plot with 18 cats cast in wax, and containers of bright and colorful steaming liquids.

Theater critic Monna Dithmer writes in her review about the rules of the game:

It gives a desired element of otherness to the lines, just as it is a hardcore, distancing dissection of the text we are being served: the characters in action on the floor, their lines out of reach, while their feelings are steaming on the sideline – in plastic boxes with fluorescent phosphor green, ultramarine and red liquids (Dithmer 2012).

The lanes of the room match the soundscape, where a number of classic pop songs divide the action. The songs function as structuring “dividers” between the Acts of the plot. Furthermore, they impose an additional echo space onto the text: from time to time, coincidences and references appear between dialogue and song texts. In *The One Who Whispers*, however, the lanes become an integral dramaturgical point that illustrates the characters' separation from each other on distinct trajectories, which Otto with his initial lie is trying to cross.

Luminous words

The crucial device in the performance, however, is the material fusion of word and image that occurs when the actors' bodies disappear in the darkness, and only the luminiscent costumes emerge as bearers of the words. Jenny, who is absent in the drama, insofar as she is really a fantasy made up by the other characters, but who is nevertheless present as a character on stage, wears a dress by designer *Henrik Vibskov* that emerges as a player in its own right. As

a work of art, the dress, while it is floating about like a simulacrum or ghost, represents the very *present absence* around which the whole plot revolves. It is an inspired move to dissolve the bond to the actor's body and to psychological theater, not by banishing the actors from the stage, and not (only) by separating voice and body through technical sound effects, but through a visual device absorbing the actors' bodies into the darkness. Like a photographic negative, the automatic links between words, voice, and body are turned upside down as bearers of the scenic presence. We still have the whole value of the live actor, but without the symbiosis of voice and body, and the whole metaphysics of presence attached to this identification of voice and body. It provides an immediately magical effect, pointing back through Dehlholm's entire oeuvre to her experiments with visual constructions and effects of perception, from *Why Does the Night Come Mother* (1989) and forward to the subsequent staging of Vladimir Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* from 2014, in which Dehlholm experiments even more radically with blacking out the stage.

Plot as DIY kit

What becomes apparent in Dehlholm's word theater is that even the plot consists of a number of elements that can be worked with spatially. Astrid Øye's piece has a simplicity that makes it very suitable for experimental games with the larger narrative entities: sequence and plot, theme, genre, and character. The characters represent classical positions or actants in the story: the (anti-) hero who has a project to find love, helpers, principals, and opponents. But they mirror each other and take over each other's functions and positions; they grapple with their own project in the big game, and in that way, the plot becomes more complex rather than less – it can be varied endlessly, and with a tiny shift in atmosphere and *mis-en-scène*, we are in an entirely different genre. Øye's text balances between humor and tragedy, between psychology and formalism. This is a real story about love and loss, but by displacing the perspective Dehlholm lets us see even our own pain, happiness, and all the small and larger-than-life experiences in between, which are made of the same ingredients and could always be regarded in a different light-fluorescent, for example! It is not for nothing that the performance starts and ends by turning a wind machine towards the audience: It is *our* expectations of what theater is and must be that have to be thoroughly ventilated!

Free-flowing phrases

But why is it necessary for Dehlholm to keep the text, so to speak, outside of the characters? Why does their isolation from each other open up the action towards the room? Part of the reason is that the stylization adds a different, formal layer of meaning to the hermeneutic, action-based and identificatory levels of representation. On a more fundamental level the stylization breaks down the unity between voice, body, and subject that embodies the notion of character in conventional drama. Drama is the archetype of the acting subject *par excellence*. The dramatic ideal is based on a classic *logos*, whose starting point and ultimate goal is the rational Cartesian subject, and which consequently is based on a view of man, as the measure of all things.

The drama is an ideal, German theater researcher Peter Szondi claimed in *Theorie des modernen Dramas* from 1956, namely the Aristotelian ideal of a literary form supported by the pure presence of human interactions, where no disruption of history or narrative interferes with the

plot as it unfolds in front of our eyes, carried by the dialogue, and in turn carried by the characters. German-Polish theater professor, Andrzej Wirth, writes in an article about Gertrude Stein how she detaches the dialogue from its bond to the characters, which in effect leads to the dissolution of the whole system of the drama. According to Wirth, this dissolution of character is necessary to make theater modern, since the bond between actor and character, and between voice and dialogue is a basic convention in theater. What appears in Stein's disruption of the character is exactly the dissolution of the identificatory individuation project of drama. Character in Stein, Wirth points out, is just one element in the overall picture, a voice among others in a collage of voices and colloquialisms. Wirth emphasizes the link from Stein to the performance theater of the sixties and seventies, which Dehlholm is influenced by. And Wirth also mentions another device regarding the dissolution of character's central setting as the bearer of the plot, which is visible all the way back from Gertrude Stein via Robert Wilson and on to Kirsten Dehlholm: the multiplication of the character, as for instance we see it in the twin figures in Dehlholm's work, and in the postdramatic practise of having more than one actor play the same role (Wirth 211).

The separation of character, voice and text, and the deconstruction of the unity between character and dialogue severely question the identification of text with drama. The issue is partly that the theater text has become synonymous with the dramatic text - a misunderstanding that, along with Heiner Goebbels, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and many others in the so-called visual theater, Dehlholm has actively contributed to dissolving by using other sorts of text than drama. However, it seems that there is another fallacy at play in the identification of text with drama, namely the reduction of the drama to text: the notion that drama is always and entirely text-based, while actually its media is to a large extent carried by physical, scenic, and theatrical means. Maybe drama does not have to be tied to the ideals of dialogue-based plot? Maybe drama as a genre is not stable, but may change over time? What if one could imagine a drama that moves beyond Szondi's Aristotelian ideal? "That is a task that I would like to take on, to create a new narrative mode in spoken theater," Dehlholm says in an interview with Per Theil from 2010.

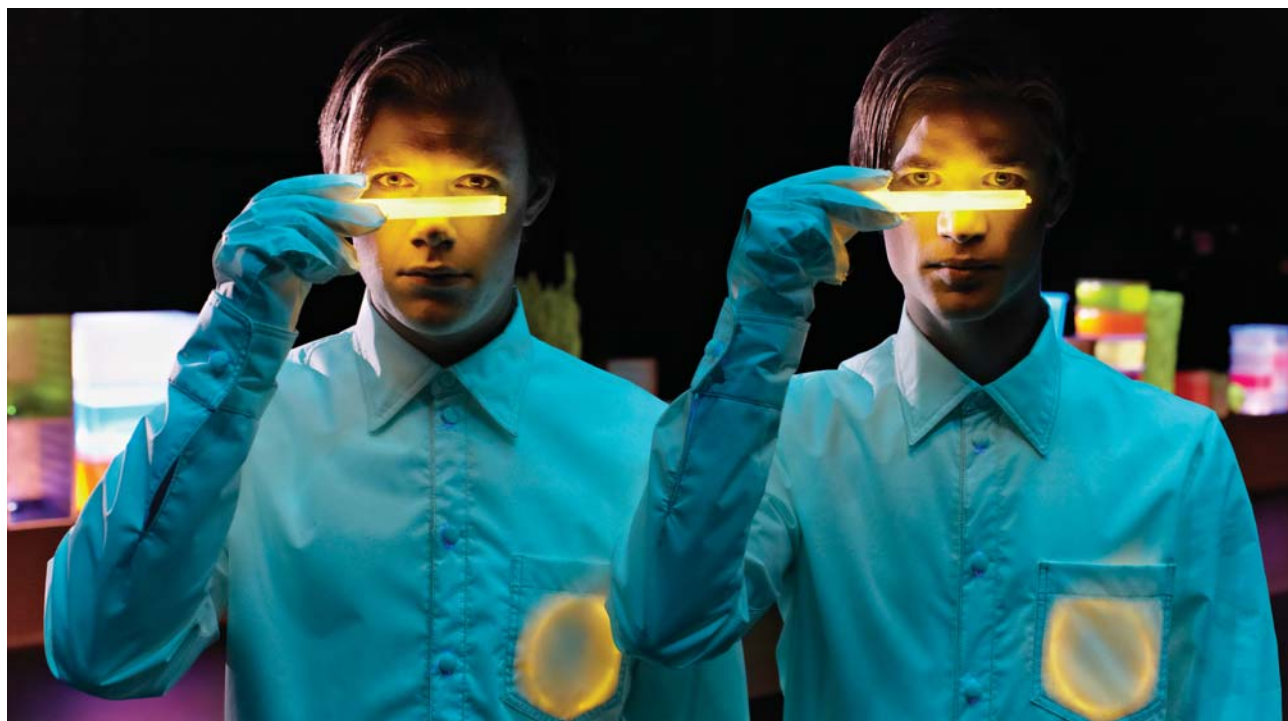
American theater scholar W.B. Worthen suggests that a dramatic work cannot be reduced to either text or performance. Drama is a genre that establishes an exchange between text and stage and unfolds itself in this very duality. Consequently, the dramatic work must be understood as the sum of all its appearances, which means that it is not possible to tie it to one single expression. Whether as text or as performance, the dramatic work is constantly in transformation. New productions reflect previous productions and affect how we read the dramatic text. This means that the work always exceeds the individual staging, but certainly also the dramatic text, which cannot be granted any exclusive, authentic authority. Worthen's point is that the dramatic work is not tied to the text - since texts are historically not at all static but evolving - but neither can it be isolated to the performance. The drama is actualized and unfolds in the interaction between its various historical manifestations. For Worthen, drama is not a static ideal, but a living, developing form.

The materiality of the text

The One Who Whispers was first developed in the laboratory of the Danish theater *Republique*, where Dehlholm and playwright Astrid Øye had the rare opportunity to try out different approaches to the material over a prolonged period, before actual rehearsals began. They carried out a carefully conducted study focused on the very exchange between performance theater and dramatic theater. This enabled them to tune in with precision on the individual elements of that process. How exactly

does a performance artist like Kirsten Dehlholm, who is so focused on the spatial and visual aspects of performance, approach dramatic elements like dialogue, plot, psychology, and character development? How exactly might a dramatic text challenge performance theater?

The initial workshop raised an awareness of how formal and psychological aspects of performance reinforce each other, how a formal device has a psychological effect and a narrative significance. An example from the workshop was the surprising effect that occurred, when the actors had to retrieve the text from a projection above the audience. Reading the text instead of learning it by heart produced a slight hesitation in the delivery of their lines, which gave a more natural rhythm of speech with pauses not normally found in a rehearsed dramatic dialogue. In this way the psychological realism of the drama penetrates into even the most formalistic scenic composition. During the workshop it was challenging for some of the classically trained actors to work with physical improvisation and the kind of rules that Dehlholm employs in her productions. It was also a challenge to connect the intensity of dramatic theater with the spatial and visual effects of the performance genre. It is my firm opinion that the close interaction between playwright and director in the workshop was crucial for both the final text and the stage production. Although Dehlholm has developed her artistic vocabulary over many years, it is still difficult for the theater to cross the genre divisions between text-based theater and performance theater. As such, *The One Who Whispers* contributes to a broadening of perspectives and expectations, not just on behalf of the audience but also within the production.



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